

Bahraini media workers and citizen journalists continued to operate in a highly restrictive environment in 2014. Since the emergence of a prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, those who disseminate information on antigovernment demonstrations, human rights abuses, or opposition views have suffered repercussions including imprisonment and torture. New arrests and prosecutions were reported throughout 2014, encouraging self-censorship among the country's mainstream media. The government also maintained direct censorship in the form of extensive website blocking.

Legal Environment

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression and of the press, the government uses the 2002 Press Law to restrict the rights of the media. The Press Law allows up to five years' imprisonment for publishing criticism of Islam or the king, inciting actions that undermine state security, or advocating a change in government. Journalists may be fined up to 2,000 dinars (\$5,300) for a list of 14 other offenses. Libel, slander, and "divulging secrets" are criminal offenses punishable by terms of no more than two years in prison or a fine of no more than 200 dinars (\$530). The government also uses counterterrorism legislation to curtail the activities of opposition groups and restrict freedom of expression. In February 2014, the government amended the penal code to specify a prison sentence of one to seven years and a fine of up to 10,000 dinars (\$26,500) for anyone who publicly insults Bahrain's king, flag, or national emblem.

During 2014, a number of journalists, bloggers, and human rights advocates were arrested on speech-related charges, and some remained in detention at year's end. For example, freelance journalist Ali Mearaj was arrested in January and sentenced in April to 30 months in prison for "insulting the king" and "improper use of information technology." He had reportedly posted protest-related articles and photographs on various websites. Several photographers and video reporters who had been arrested in previous years received prison sentences during 2014, and at least two were still serving their terms as of December: Ahmed Humaidan, a freelance photographer who was arrested after covering a violent protest in 2012, was sentenced to 10 years in prison in March, and Hussein Hubail, another freelancer, was sentenced to five years in prison in April after being arrested in 2013 for allegedly inciting protests.

In September, police arrested women's rights activist Ghada Jamsheer on defamation and other charges linked to her tweets about alleged corruption at King Hamad University Hospital. A hospital official, Salman Attiyat Allah al-Khalifa, who is a member of the royal family, filed the complaint behind the arrest. Jamsheer was released on bail in November and then immediately rearrested on charges that she assaulted a police officer while detained. Her several related charges were handled separately in a series of trials, some of which were ongoing at year's end. Nabeel Rajab, a blogger and president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), was arrested in October on charges of insulting the security forces via Twitter. He was granted bail after a month in detention, and his trial was pending at year's end. Rajab had recently completed a two-year prison term on other charges in May.

There is no law guaranteeing freedom of information. The Information Affairs Authority (IAA) has the power to censor and prevent the distribution of local and foreign publications, close newspapers through court proceedings, ban books and films, block websites, and prosecute individuals. Under the 2002 Telecommunications Law, the government has considerable authority to regulate internet activity. All

websites are required to register with the IAA, and religious and political content is heavily censored. Website administrators are responsible for all content posted on their sites and are subject to the same libel laws as print journalists.

Political Environment

Prior to the protests of 2011, the Bahraini media's coverage of news and politics was more critical and independent than in most other Gulf countries. Nonetheless, newspapers tended to avoid covering "sensitive" issues such as sectarian tensions, relations with surrounding countries, government corruption, demonstrations, and human rights violations. After the protests erupted in early 2011, media outlets and individual journalists came under increased pressure from the government. Media workers have reported being contacted directly by government representatives and warned not to report on subjects related to the prodemocracy demonstrations or other sensitive issues. Most domestic opposition publications have been shut down. Some, such as *Al-Wasat*, were eventually reopened, but remain targets of legal harassment and public intimidation.

Progovernment media sometimes engage in outright misinformation. A 2014 report from Bahrain Watch found 25 instances from 2011 through 2013 in which the Bahraini press had simply invented quotations from foreign officials to support government positions, without correction or apology. For example, in October 2013, the sister papers *Akhbar al-Khaleej* and *Gulf Daily News* falsely quoted a former U.S. general as saying that the protests in Bahrain were instigated by Iran and formed part of an American conspiracy. When reporting on the arrests of journalists and activists, the mainstream media typically adhere to the accounts given in official press releases. The exception is *Al-Wasat*, which tends to provide more thorough coverage.

The only alternative space for public expression in Bahrain is online. However, the internet is closely monitored, with the government devoting considerable resources to surveillance and cybersecurity. Various opposition publications have survived on the web but are forced to operate clandestinely from outside the country. Through orders to internet service providers, the government blocks thousands of websites, many of which are targeted for their politically sensitive content. Internet platforms used for video streaming or for holding online seminars are blocked, as are the sites of human rights groups operating within Bahrain. Because the mainstream press self-censors, bloggers and microbloggers have become more active to fill the void, which in turn draws government scrutiny.

The authorities have restricted foreign media access in recent years, particularly during sensitive periods like the anniversary of the landmark 2011 protests and the country's Formula One Grand Prix. Many journalists have been denied entry, and several have been deported for covering antigovernment protests, though no high-profile expulsions of foreign journalists were reported in 2014.

Bahraini journalists who document street demonstrations face physical violence, arbitrary detention, and torture in custody. In addition to defamation and other speech-related offenses, the authorities have used apparently fabricated charges of assaulting police officers to detain news providers and activists, as with Ghada Jamsheer in November. In August, Maryam al-Khawaja of the BCHR was arrested on arrival at Manama airport on similar charges, which she categorically denied. She left the country after being released on bail and was convicted in absentia, receiving a one-year prison sentence in December. Videographer Hussam Suroor was arrested in September and sentenced to 10 years in prison for allegedly attacking an official, participating in demonstrations, and possessing flammable products. Also that month, 19-year-old activist and photographer Mansoor al-Jamri was sentenced in absentia to six months in prison

for allegedly attacking security personnel. Among the several journalists who were reportedly abused in custody in 2014 were freelance photographer Sayed Ahmed al-Mosawi, who was arrested in February and remained in detention without charge as of December, and freelance photographer Ammar Abdulrasool, who was arrested July and sentenced in October to two years in prison for allegedly participating in illegal protests and possessing Molotov cocktails.

Economic Environment

Bahrain hosts six privately owned daily newspapers, four in Arabic and two in English. While some of these papers can be critical of the government, only *Al-Wasat* is considered truly independent of government influence, though its editors practice self-censorship. The government does not own any newspapers, but the IAA maintains significant control over private publications. Newspapers rely heavily on advertising revenue to sustain their operations and often tailor coverage to avoid offending advertisers that do not want their businesses associated with critical reporting.

The government maintains a monopoly on domestic broadcast media. Private broadcasting licenses are not awarded despite continued interest from media owners. Foreign radio and television broadcasts are generally received without interference, and the majority of households have access to satellite stations; Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya, which is based in the United Arab Emirates, remain Bahraini citizens' main sources of news. The internet is also widely used as a news and information source. Some 91 percent of Bahrain's population accessed the internet in 2014.